

# Till death do us part: Exploring the Irish farmer-farm relationship in later life through the lens of ‘Insideness’

SHANE FRANCIS CONWAY<sup>1\*</sup>, JOHN McDONAGH<sup>1</sup>, MAURA FARRELL<sup>1</sup> and ANNE KINSELLA<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The senior generation’s unwillingness to relinquish managerial duties and retire is a globally recognized characteristic of intergenerational family farm transfer. This is despite the array of financial incentives put in place to stimulate and entice the process. Applying Rowles’ concept of ‘insideness’ as a theoretical framework, this paper brings into focus the suitability and appropriateness of previous and existing farm transfer policy strategies, by presenting an insightful, nuanced analysis of the deeply embedded attachment older farmers have with their farms, and how such a bond can stifle the necessary hand over of the farm business to the next generation. This research employs a multi-method triangulation design, consisting of a self-administered questionnaire and an Irish adaptation of the International FARMTRANSFERS Survey in conjunction with complimentary Problem-Centred Interviews, to generate a comprehensive insight into the intricate, multi-level farmer-farm relationship in later life. The overriding themes to emerge from the content analysis of the empirical research are farmer’s inherit desire to stay rooted in place in old age and also to maintain legitimate connectedness within the farming community by remaining active and productive on the farm. Additionally, there is a strong sense of nostalgia attributed to the farm, as it is found to represent a mosaic of the farmer’s achievements as well as being a landscape of memories. The paper concludes by suggesting that a greater focus on the farmer-farm relationship has the potential to finally unite farm transfer policy efforts with the mind-set of its targeted audience, after decades of disconnect.

**KEYWORDS:** family farming; insideness; succession; retirement; generational renewal; rural sustainability

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The survival, continuity and future prosperity of the agricultural sector, traditional family farm model and broader sustainability of rural society ultimately depends on an age-diverse farming population. With a steady decline in the number of young farm families reported as being key in the demoralization of rural communities in which the farm is located (Ball and Wiley, 2005; Goeller, 2012), and the recent declaration by European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Phil Hogan, that a priority for future CAP reforms must focus on generational renewal (European Commission, 2017), it is increasingly clear that a major challenge presents itself in the area of intergenerational family farm transfer. Intergenerational family farm transfer, encompassing three separate yet interrelated processes of succession, retirement and inheritance (Gasson and Errington, 1993), is an integral facet of farm management. While present attempts to confront the global demographic

trend of an ageing farming population and a low level of land mobility (Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Bogue, 2013; Chiswell, 2014; Fischer and Burton, 2014; Zagata and Sutherland, 2015), have added significantly to existing knowledge in this field, there are numerous, intricate emotional facets affecting the older generation’s farm transfer decision-making process, which for the most part have been neglected (Conway *et al.*, 2016). The outcome; a derailment of the process in many cases (*ibid.*).

This paper, drawing on gerontological geographer, Graham Rowles’ (1983a) concept of ‘insideness’, contextualises the difficulty and reluctance to ‘step aside’ and retire from farming (Foskey, 2005; Lobley *et al.*, 2010; Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Fasina and Inegbedion, 2014) that continues to be the mainstay in many rural areas globally. The paper probes into the subjective experiences of farmers in the Republic of Ireland in later life and unearths a layer of understanding and attachment, both implicit and explicit, between farmer and farm, that we argue must be central to policies aimed at facilitating family farm intergenerational transfer. Reinforcing the

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<sup>1</sup> Discipline of Geography, National University of Ireland, Galway, University Road, Galway, Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Teagasc Agricultural Economics and Farms Surveys Department, Mellows Campus, Athenry, Co. Galway, Ireland.

\*Corresponding author: Email: shane.conway@nuigalway.ie.